

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 48

NEW YORK TIMES
26 January 1986

Honduran Likely to Need Support of Army and U.S.

By JAMES LeMOYNE

Special to The New York Times

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Jan. 25 — He will not take office until Monday, but already a wide variety of political commentators here are predicting that the next President of Honduras is likely to be even more dependent than his predecessor on the army and the United States Embassy.

The commentators point out that the President-elect, José Azcona Hoyo, faces a bankrupt economy, growing demands for change from landless peasants, an entrenched and politically powerful Honduran military that receives heavy expenditures of Pentagon money and manpower and an expanding guerrilla war against Nicaragua, also encouraged and financed by the Reagan Administration.

Mr. Azcona is unlikely to make any major changes in Honduras's relationship with the United States, according to several foreign envoys here. And despite past criticism of the presence of Nicaraguan guerrilla forces here, Mr. Azcona appears ready to permit them to continue operating, allowing a discreet resumption of American aid to the rebels that has been obstructed by President Roberto Suazo Córdova.

Military Retains Power

Although he will earn the distinction of becoming the first elected leader in more than 50 years to follow another elected president into office, the military remains the real power in Honduras, according to virtually all political experts.

"Power as such is not at play here — it remains in the hands of the army and the United States Embassy," said a Honduran with close ties to the army and top political figures. "Mr. Azcona is going to have to rely on the United States for economic aid and to support him against pressure from the military."

Mr. Azcona will be asked to deal with difficult problems. Despite political liabilities that include shaky control of the National Assembly and no established tradition of democratic rule, he must govern the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti.

In addition, Mr. Azcona, 58 years old and leader of the Liberal Party, will be forced to deal with a strong display of United States power, now being expressed in a near-permanent American military presence that includes constant military maneuvers, as well as several United States-built military bases, one of which is used by the Central Intelligence Agency to supply Nicaraguan guerrillas.

Controlling Nicaraguan Rebels

The growing United States-backed guerrilla war against Nicaragua, launched from Honduran border bases, is likely to be the most difficult issue Mr. Azcona will be asked to manage, according to several Hondurans. Although the country appears to be strongly opposed to the Sandinista Government, many Hondurans seem to fear being dragged into war against Nicaragua.

United States concern with Honduras has been indicated by the extraordinary lineup of top Reagan Administration officials who visited the country in the last year, including two successive heads of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, two successive national security advisers, senior C.I.A. officials and top State Department officials. Vice President Bush visited last year and will be present at Mr. Azcona's inauguration on Monday.

Mr. Azcona's road to the presidency was not easy. He was declared the winner of the controversial presidential election held in November only after heated maneuvering by President Suazo to remain in office was finally defeated by American and Honduran military pressure.

Because of Mr. Suazo's efforts to stay on, the army was forced to press a political deal on presidential candidates under which the winner of the election was the candidate who received the most votes of the party that received the largest number of votes.

A Minority President

That candidate proved to be Mr. Azcona, but the odd electoral arithmetic left him a minority president, selected by less than 30 percent of the vote. His leading opponent, the National Party leader, Rafael Leonardo Callejas, won more than 40 percent of the vote. But since the total number of votes for all the candidates in the Liberal Party was higher than the total number of votes for National Party candidates, Mr. Azcona was able to take the presidency.

The resulting political weakness of the new Government has already been expressed in several ways. According to foreign and Honduran political analysts, the army has kept control of foreign affairs by choosing the Foreign Minister, who happens to be the cousin of the head of the army, Gen. Walter López Reyes.

In addition, two Honduran sources say army commanders had got in touch with trade union leaders to tell them to press Mr. Azcona to develop policy to deal with the country's economic problems, a concern to the army, which is worried about future social unrest in a peasant country where most people are

landless and unemployed.

Mr. Azcona may find policy making difficult, however, since he barely controls the Congress. Honduras's political system assigns congressional seats according to the votes for each presidential candidate. Mr. Azcona's vote total gave him control of only 46 of 134 deputies.

Land Reform Sidetracked

What this means is that Mr. Azcona will have to make pacts constantly to pass bills in Congress. He cut his first deal with his National Party opponents this week, giving them control of the Supreme Court and half of all other judicial appointments in the country in return for the right to appoint leaders of Congress.

The deal effectively insures that the Honduran judiciary will continue its tradition of being selected on the basis of political loyalty rather than competence, according to both National and Liberal Party analysts. It also is likely to assure that the country's land redistribution law will remain unapplied, despite growing peasant demands for land, because conservative National Party judges will obstruct it.